

THE CAT, SEUSS, AND RACE

by Philip Nel

Was the Cat in the Hat Black? After all, he's a cat, isn't he?

Seuss's Cat is racially complicated. Like a lot of 20th century popular culture (i.e. Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse), the Cat is partially inspired by blackface minstrelsy, a popular theatrical entertainment in the 19th century and first half of the 20th century, in which performers blackened their faces to impersonate and mock Blackness. The Cat in the Hat's outrageous fashion sense (white gloves, brightly colored hat and bow tie), exaggerated styles of movement, breaking rules that he pretends to follow, and his confidence-man behavior all derive from a common minstrel character.

Seuss (born Theodor Seuss Geisel, 1904-1991) did both racist work and anti-racist work, often at the same time. In the 1940s, he drew political cartoons, some of which dehumanized people of Japanese descent, and others of which opposed both anti-Semitism and racism against African Americans. In the 1950s, Seuss published *Horton Hears a Who!*, hailed by one reviewer as "a rhymed lesson in protection of minorities and their rights." He also wrote his first version of *The Sneetches*, an anti-racist fable, and he published an essay that critiques racist humor. During that same period, he used racist caricature in his books. In *If I Ran the Zoo*, protagonist Gerald McGrew travels to "the mountains of Zomba-ma-Tant / With helpers who all wear their eyes at a slant," and to the "African Island of Yerka" where he meets two stereotypically rendered Black men.

That Seuss is doing both racist anti-racist work at the same time can be confusing because many of us see racism as an "either/or": people are either racist or not racist. Indeed, that's how Seuss himself understood racism. Unfortunately, racism is more of a "both/and." It's not unusual. It's ordinary. It's embedded in culture — such as the cartoons and books of Dr. Seuss.

It's upsetting to learn that a beloved children's author used racist caricature. So, many people — especially White people — seek excuses. In response to recent criticism, his grand-nephew Ted Owens has said of Seuss: "I know one thing for sure — I never saw one ounce of racism in anything he said, or how he lived his life, or what his stories were about." Mr. Owens' claim relies on perception and intent. But racism does not require either. People can perpetuate racism without intending to. I don't think Seuss intended to. Because he was unaware of the degree to which his visual imagination was steeped in caricature, he used racist stereotypes even as he was also writing anti-racist stories. We might see Dr. Seuss as the "woke" White guy who wasn't as woke as he thought.

"Now, wait just a minute," you might object. "People thought differently then." But all people at any given time do not think about race in precisely the same way. As Robin Bernstein has shown in her work on nineteenth-century anti-racism, the range of available racial beliefs remains constant over time, but the distribution of those beliefs change. Both extraordinary and ordinary people have opposed White supremacy. Both extraordinary and ordinary people have supported White supremacy. To claim that people 60 years ago were racist but people now are enlightened both suggests that past racism was inevitable and implies that social change is a natural, ongoing march. Yet, progress makes gains and endures setbacks, and always requires people committed to making a positive difference.

So, what do we do with the Cat in the Hat? Do we say that the blackface influence would probably not be noticed, and so is not damaging? Does a gentle caricature prepare us to accept a more harmful caricature? Should the race of the actor playing the Cat in this production influence your response? And what do we do with Dr. Seuss?

These are not easy questions. But these are conversations we need to have.

Philip Nel, University Distinguished Professor of English at Kansas State University, is the author of *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: The Hidden Racism of Children's Literature and the Need for Diverse Books* (2017).